THE HUMAN SIDE OF UNCLE SAM
(Nation's School of the Air)

FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

An interview between Dr. Paul B. Dunbar, Assistant Chief, Food and Drug Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture, and Charles Herndon, a student of Paul Junior High School, Washington, D. C. Broadcast Thursday, December 8, 1938, over Station WOL, Washington, D. C.

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CINCINNATI ANNOUNCER:

To learn about Uncle Sam's Food and Drug Administration, and the men who protect our daily food -- meat, butter, eggs, salmon, canned goods, nuts, spices, tea -- all the rest of it, we take you now to the studios of Station WOL in the Nation's Capital.

WALTER COMPTON:

And here we are in the Nation's Capital, with Doctor Paul B. Dunbar, Assistant Chief of the Food and Drug Administration, United States Department of Agriculture, and our friend Charles Herndon, a student of Paul Junior High School, Washington, D. C. Charles says yesterday he visited a museum, with Doctor Dunbar as guide. I'd like to see that place myself.

CHARLES HERNDON:

But don't go just before dinner, Mr. Compton.

COMPTON:

Why not?

HERNDON:

It might take away your appetite. Tell him about it, Doctor Dunbar.

DUNBAR:

You see, Mr. Compton, in our museum, in the Department of Agriculture, we have exhibits of food.

COMPTON:

Nothing I like better than good food.

DUNBAR:

But this isn't good food. It's food we have removed from warehouses, grocery stores, meat markets, candy counters.

COMPTON:

What's wrong with the candy?

HERNDON:

Plenty!

DUNBAR:

Charles didn't like the candy. A big chunk of hardened sugar, full of dirty nails, nuts, bolts, all sorts of junk.

HERNDON:

Even hairpins.

DUNBAR:

Our inspectors took that delicious assortment from a cooking kettle, in a candy plant.

HERNDON:

Tell about the candy with -- trinkets -- in it.

DUNBAR:

Some of the candy in our museum has toys imbedded inside -- marbles, or metal trinkets. And also, we have X-ray pictures of children who tried to swallow these trinkets.

HERNDON:

I saw those pictures. The toys got stuck in their throats.

DUNBAR:

That's right. I don't have to explain why it's against the law to sell candy like that.

HERNDON:

Anybody ought to know that stuff is dangerous.

DUNBAR:

You'd think so. We also have an exhibit of "economic frauds." Food put up in packages that fool you into thinking you're getting more than you really are.

HERNDON:

Like the cheese.

DUNBAR:

Yes, cheese put up in packages with false bottoms. Vanilla extract, and olive oil, in fancy bottles with sunken panels. Noodles, without even a spoonful of egg yolk -- put up in yellow, transparent paper -- to make the noodles look yellow, and fool the customer into thinking she's buying egg noodles. These "economic frauds" don't injure your health, but they injure your pocketbook, so we take them off the market, along with unwholesome, or dangerous, food products.

HERNDON:

Tell about the medicines.

DUNBAR:

It would take the rest of the day, Charles, to describe all the worthless medicines -- fake cancer cures, and so on -- we've removed from the market.

HERNDON:

But that -- elixir sulfanilamide -- is the worst.

DUNBAR:

One of the worst. Last year, that deadly stuff killed over a hundred people. It was indirectly responsible for the passage of the new Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act last June. You know about that new law, don't you?

HERNDON:

I know there is a new law -- but I don't know much about it.

DUNBAR:

Next June, the new law will take the place of the old Food and Drug Act of 1906.

HERNDON:

Didn't we have a law like that before 1906?

DUNBAR:

Not a national Food and Drug law. But long before 1906, the Department of Agriculture recognized the importance of honest food. In the early days -- sixty, seventy, years ago -- Uncle Sam's chemists used to get together in their laboratories and examine food and medicines. The staff was very small -- and everybody worked early and late. Everybody but Tom, the office cat. He got fat and lazy -- eating crumbs of food that fell from the laboratory tables. Then one day a chemist put Tom to work. They tried out some of the fake medicines on Tom.

HERNDON:

What happened?

DUNBAR:

Tom left the Government service. He didn't like the work. Spotty, the pup, took his place.

HERNDON:

But what does the -- Food and Drug Administration -- have to do with the Food and Drugs Act?

DUNBAR:

It's responsible for enforcing the Food and Drugs Act, and six others -- including the Insecticide Act, the Caustic Poison Act, and the Tea Act.

HERNDON:

What do you do with tea?

DUNBAR:

When a big ship comes in from the Orient -- from China, Japan, Formosa, India -- with a cargo of tea, our inspectors are waiting at the docks.

HERNDON:

Where?

DUNBAR:

Oh, in New York, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle -- even Honolulu. They inspect the tea, to see whether it meets our standards. If it does, O.K. It's allowed to enter the country. If it doesn't, that tea goes right back to the country it came from.

HERNDON:

Do you inspect very much tea?

DUNBAR:

Only 85 and a half million pounds, last year.

HERNDON:

Boy! That's some tea!

DUNBAR:

Enough to float a battleship. And almost all of it, we're glad to say, was good tea.

HERNDON:

I wish I could be in New York some time, when a ship comes in from India, and watch the food inspectors.

DUNBAR:

No reason why you can't -- if you happen to be around at the right time. This month you'd find inspectors busy with Christmas foods -- nuts, spices, figs, dates, cocoa beans.

HERNDON:

What do you do with them -- if they aren't good?

DUNBAR:

Destroy them, if they're not fit to eat -- or send them back where they came from.

HERNDON:

Must be a big job!

DUNBAR:

It is a big job.

HERNDON:

What is the -- Insecticide Act?

DUNBAR:

It protects farmers, fruit growers, and citizens, like you and me, from buying bug poisons that won't kill bugs. For example, fly sprays that won't kill flies, and moth control preparations that won't control anything. We take worthless products off the market -- so your mother won't waste her house money on preparations that allow the clothes moth to go merrily on, and eat up your winter overcoat.

HERNDON:

What is the -- Poison Act?

DUNBAR:

The Caustic Poison Act requires a label on such dangerous poisons as ammonia, lye, and carbolic acid. A label that says "POISON" -- in big letters.

HERNDON:

Doctor Dunbar, I wish you'd tell me more about your food inspectors. You said they even go to Alaska, to inspect salmon.

DUNBAR:

Yes, every year they make a tour of the salmon canneries in Alaska. This year they traveled by airplane. It took them only two days to make the same trip that used to take five weeks -- in a launch.

HERNDON:

They sure go places!

DUNBAR:

Yes, but don't get the idea that Uncle Sam's food and drug inspectors live the life of Riley. Remember those pictures I showed you, of the Ohio flood?

HERNDON:

Yes sir. You said the flood ruined thousands of tons of food -- apples, potatoes, coffee, sugar, butter -- lettuce.

DUNBAR:

And we had to destroy all that food, because it was contaminated by filthy water, and not fit to eat. If you want to be a food inspector, you've got to be right on the job, during a flood, with your hip boots, and a rowboat, and plenty of warm clothes.

HERNDON:

You had to destroy medicines, too.

DUNBAR:

Yes sir! All food and all medicines contaminated by filthy water. Another thing that keeps us busy -- week in and week out -- is investigating food poisoning outbreaks. Nine times out of ten, they're due to somebody's carelessness.

HERNDON:

What kind of carelessness?

DUNBAR:

Oh, a thoughtless cook may leave a custard pie -- or cream puffs -- in a warm room. Then the bacteria that infect food set up housekeeping, increase and multiply. The unfortunate people who eat the pie have a bad case of food poisoning -- than which there is nothing more painful.

HERNDON:

What should you do -- with custard pie? I mean to keep it good.

DUNBAR:

Keep it cool. Keep it in the refrigerator -- so the bacteria won't have a chance to develop. The same thing applies to home-made salad dressings, and sandwich fillings made of meat and fish, but most of all to pastries and custards. Keep them in a cold place. Now there's another king of food poisoning that usually proves fatal. Somebody leaves a poisonous insecticide in the kitchen. The cook thinks it's baking powder or soda. Some people are so careless they store rat poison in baking powder cans.

HERNDON:

Nobody with any sense would do that!

DUNBAR:

You're absolutely right. You should have seen Inspector Larrick, five or six years ago, chasing down nine fruit cakes, heavily loaded with arsenic. That's a regular detective story, with Larrick playing the part of Sherlock Holmes.

HERNDON:

Did he get the cakes?

DUNBAR:

Yes, he located every one -- even the cake that had been sent to Canada, as a Christmas present.

HERNDON:

How did the arsenic get into the fruit cakes?

DUNBAR:

By way of the flour barrel. Clues indicated that one of the children of the lady who baked the cakes, dumped an insecticide into the flour barrel. They both looked alike to the child, and he wanted the insecticide bag to play with.

HERNDON:

That certainly was a narrow escape!

DUNBAR:

Well, just remember that poison -- any kind of poison -- left in reach of children, pets, or careless cooks -- is as dangerous as a loaded shotgun.

HERNDON:

Well, I guess not even the Food and Drugs Act can keep people from being careless.

DUNBAR:

You're right about that. By the way, you referred to the "Food and Drugs Act." The new law -- the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, will become effective next June, and take the place of the old law.

HERNDON:

You started to tell me how the new law was passed, because so many people died, from taking -- elixir sulfanilamide.

DUNBAR:

Oh yes, I'm glad you reminded me. I told you that Congress passed the Food and Drugs Act in 1906.

HERNDON:

Yes sir.

DUNBAR:

That was a very good law for its time. But as the years went on, changes occurred in food and drug industries. We discovered the law had many weak places. For one thing, the old law does not require that new drugs be carefully tested, to make sure they are safe, before they are sold to sick people. Now, in 1938, that old law is as out of date as a 1913 Model T Ford. Well, last fall, a man put on the market a deadly new drug, Elixir Sulfanilamide. He made 240 gallons, and sold most of it -- enough to have killed thousands of people. Our inspectors and chemists searched the whole United States for that stuff, and finally accounted for all of it, excepting what had been taken as medicine by the hundred people who died.

HERNDON:

That was a whole lot worse than the poisoned fruit cakes!

DUNBAR:

Yes, it was one of the worst tragedies we've ever been called on to investigate. But now we have a new law, and it requires that all new drugs be tested, for safety, before they're sold. That provision went into effect immediately, last June, as did also the provision controlling dangerous cosmetics -- eyelash dyes that were causing blindness, or death. You know what I mean by cosmetics.

HERNDON:

Yes sir. Powder, and lipstick. Do you know what Doctor Dahle, in one of your laboratories, said about cosmetics?

DUNBAR:

Dahle's been doing a lot of work on colors for cosmetics. Under the new law, only safe colors can be used. But what did he tell you?

HERNDON:

He said that four thousand years ago, the women in Egypt used a tonic for gray hair. Do you know what it was made of?

DUNBAR:

I see you wrote it down. Go ahead and read it.

HERNDON: (READ SLOWLY AND DISTINCTLY)

This hair tonic was made of "fat of the lion, fat of the hippopotamus, fat of the crocodile, fat of the serpent, and fat of the Egyptian goat. Make into one, and rub the head, of the bald one, therewith."

DUNBAR:

If I were an Egyptian, I'd rather be bald -- than use that stuff. To change the subject, did you see the laboratories where we keep the roosters, frogs, guinea pigs, white rats?

HERNDON:

Not yet. I didn't have time yesterday. I'm going back this afternoon.

DUNBAR:

Good. Those animals help us test drugs, medicines, and some food products. Charles, you get Doctor Nelson to show you how the white rats help him test codliver oil -- thousands of gallons of it.

HERNDON:

Why do you test codliver oil?

DUNBAR:

To see whether it contains as much Vitamin D as the law requires. If it does, and you feed it to a white rat that has weak bones -- a bad case of rickets -- that rat will perk up in a week or ten days, and its bones will begin to heal -- to get strong again. Then we know this codliver oil contains the Vitamin D the baby needs, to keep it strong. But you come down and see for yourself.

HERNDON:

I'll be down today! Right after school.

DUNBAR:

Fine. We'll be looking for you.

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